The Castro Question and the Cuban Missile Crisis

As the defining moment of the Kennedy Administration and a key watershed in the development of the Cold War, the Cuban missile crisis must also loom large in any analysis of Anglo-American relations in this period. In the minds of the key policy-makers on both sides of the Atlantic the missile crisis was closely linked to the problem of Berlin discussed in the previous chapter. Both Macmillan and Kennedy feared that Khrushchev’s goal in placing missiles in Cuba might be to press for some form of trade over Berlin. Nevertheless, although the crisis had broader ramifications for the waging of the Cold War, when judging the British role in October 1962 it is important always to have in mind Kennedy’s core perception of the Cuban problem. Here was a direct threat to the security of the United States, involving a Soviet incursion into the Western hemisphere. As such, it had the gravest potential domestic repercussions for the president. In this sense it was not a crisis in which from Kennedy’s perspective the Anglo-American relationship could expect to occupy centre stage.

The background in terms of Anglo-American relations over Cuba before the missile crisis was not auspicious. The British Government could not, of course, be expected to share the degree of American distrust of the Castro regime that developed apace during the first eighteen months of the Kennedy Administration. On the simplest level, Britain did not have the same history of involvement in Cuba as did the United States. On the other hand, the extensive residual British colonial role in the Caribbean, of which the Macmillan Government was struggling to divest itself, meant that it had to seek some degree of cooperation with Washington. When Britain finally managed to extricate itself from commitments in the area, it was acknowledged, the US would be their inheritor.

Since parallels with the Suez crisis were to be drawn on quite extensively on both sides of the Atlantic during October 1962,¹ it might also be appropriate to observe here that there was something of a similarity between the US reaction to Castro and the British reaction to Nasser six years earlier.² The nature of the challenge mounted by these two nationalist
leaders provoked a sort of visceral response that was difficult for the leaders of other countries fully to understand. Here one returns to the notion of differences in perception outlined at the beginning of this study. Just as Washington would never fully be able to comprehend the British perception of Nasser, so London would not be able to understand the American perception of Castro.

Much like the British reaction to Nasser, American disillusionment with Castro did not follow immediately in the wake of his seizure of power from the corrupt dictator Batista at the very end of 1958. Indeed, the Cuban leader even visited the United States during April 1959, speaking at Harvard where he was escorted by the then Dean, McGeorge Bundy,3 and impressing Dean Acheson who happened to meet him during a dinner at the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton. Acheson came away with the conclusion that ‘this fellow Castro really knows what he is doing. He is going to cause us some problems down the road.’4 President Eisenhower, for his part, chose not to meet Castro during his spring 1959 US tour, preferring instead to take a golfing break in Georgia. One British diplomat noted at the time the happy coincidence between the wishes of the president’s doctor that he should take a rest and the strong desire of the State Department to get him out of town.5 Indeed, concerns soon rose further over Castro’s close links with the Cuban Communist Party, his expropriation of American property, and the imprisonment of his critics. During the spring of 1960, Castro moved openly to align himself with the Soviet Union, and accepted Soviet aid.6 Eisenhower’s response was to authorise on 17 March 1960 a programme of covert action intended to overthrow the Cuban leader.7 In Harold Macmillan’s view the Americans were ‘paralysed and uncertain’ in their efforts to deal with Castro. ‘What a pity they never understood “colonialism” and “imperialism” till too late’, he reflected.8 During the final months of the Eisenhower Administration a US-sponsored move to topple Castro came to seem more and more likely, with the Cuban leader alerting his forces in expectation of an invasion at the end of October 1960.9 Kennedy for one was relieved that Eisenhower did not choose to act against Castro, believing that a successful invasion in advance of the presidential election would have handed victory to Nixon. During the final weeks of the campaign he endeavoured to outflank Nixon on the issue by calling for US assistance to Cuban exile forces. Precisely just such a plan had of course been the subject of CIA preparations since March of that year.10

When Kennedy came to office, he inherited the CIA’s existing plans for Cuba. From the outset, despite his earlier advocacy, he was uneasy about the scheme for the landing of Cuban exile forces leading CIA Director Allen Dulles to describe the proposed Cuban operation as a ‘sort of orphan child JFK had adopted … He had no real love or affection for it …’11 Its aim would be to spark off supposed domestic opposition to Castro leading to